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ABSTRACT

This digest identifies cultural values that may affect the learning processes of Hispanic-American students, reviews research on the learning styles of Hispanic-American students, and discusses the implications of this research for counseling and teaching Hispanic youth. One cultural value that is of paramount importance in most Hispanic cultures is family commitment. Other values and characteristics suggested by research are a greater inclination among Hispanic than Anglo adolescents to adopt their parents' religious beliefs and lifestyle; stereotyped sex roles; and more and earlier independence among Hispanic male adolescents than male adolescents of the general U.S. population. Several studies have compared students of various ethnic groups in terms of five categories of learning style. These studies suggest that: (1) cool temperatures and formal design are important for Mexican-American students (environmental learning style); (2) Mexican-Americans require a higher degree of structure than other groups (emotional learning style); (3) Mexican-American students prefer solitary learning less than Caucasian students (sociological learning style); (4) Latinos' strongest perceptual strength is kinesthetic (physiological learning style); and (5) Mexican-American students are more field dependent than are non-minority students (psychological learning style). There are several implications of this research for counseling and teaching Hispanic-American students. Schools can provide Spanish-speaking teachers and counselors. Group counseling with peers can be helpful for Hispanic adolescents with identity-related problems. Educators can address self-image problems of Hispanic-American students that may result from a rejection of their ethnicity by using interventions that celebrate cultural diversity. In general, counselors and teachers can be aware that Hispanic-Americans are a diverse group with differing customs and values. They should emphasize the learning style strengths of each individual and match instructional resources and methods to individual learning style preferences. (BC)

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Hispanic-American Students and Learning Style

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This digest identifies cultural values that may impact the learning processes of Hispanic-American students, reviews the research on the learning styles of Hispanic-American students, and discusses the implications of this research for counseling and teaching Hispanic youth.

Cultural Values of Hispanic-Americans

Hispanic-Americans are united by customs, language, religion, and values. There is, however, an extensive diversity of traits among Hispanic-Americans. One characteristic that is of paramount importance in most Hispanic cultures is family commitment, which involves loyalty, a strong support system, a belief that a child's behavior reflects on the honor of the family, a hierarchial order among siblings, and a duty to care for family members. This strong sense of other-directedness conflicts with the United States' mainstream emphasis on individualism (Vasquez, 1990). Indeed, Hispanic culture's emphasis on cooperation in the attainment of goals can result in Hispanic students' discomfort with this nation's conventional classroom competition.

Hispanic adolescents are more inclined than Anglo adolescents to adopt their parents' commitment to religious and political beliefs, occupational preferences, and lifestyle (Black et al., 1991). Spirituality, the dignity of each individual, and respect for authority figures are valued throughout Hispanic culture. Stereotyped sex roles tend to exist among many Latinos: the male is perceived as dominant and strong, whereas the female is perceived as nurturing and self-sacrificing. Note, however, that in Latino cultures, the term "machismo" (used by Anglos to refer to male chauvinism) refers to a concept of chivalry that encompasses gallantry, courtesy, charity, and courage (Baron, 1991). Hispanic male adolescents display more and earlier independence than the male adolescents of the general U.S. population. However, some researchers (Black et al., 1991) have found that Chicano secondary school students often exhibit lower levels of self-esteem than their Anglo counterparts.

Learning Styles Research

An expanding body of research affirms that teaching and counseling students with interventions that are congruent with the students' learning-style preferences result in their increased academic achievement and more positive attitudes toward learning. Research on the learning styles of Hispanic-Americans in particular, however, is limited. Within the Latino groups, the majority of studies have focused on the learning styles of Mexican-American elementary school children. Several investigations (Dunn, Griggs, & Price, 1993; Jalali, 1988; Sims, 1988; Yong and Ewing, 1992) have compared various ethnic groups of students in elementary school through college levels using a measure that identifies 21 elements of learning style grouped into five categories.

1. Environmental learning style elements include sound, temperature, design, and light. A cool temperature and formal design were identified as important elements for Mexican-American elementary and middle school students (Dunn, Griggs, & Price, 1993; Jalali, 1988; Yong & Ewing, 1992).

2. Emotional learning style elements include responsibility, structure, persistence, and motivation. Sims (1988) reported that Mexican-American third- and fourth-graders were the least conforming of three ethnic groups studied. Yong and Ewing (1992), however, found that Mexican-American middle-school adolescents were conforming. The disparities between these data may result from subjects' age, lifestyle, and urban/rural differences in the two studies. Both of these studies reported that Mexican-Americans required a higher degree of structure than did other groups.

3. Sociological learning style elements are concerned with the social patterns in which one learns. Learning alone (as opposed to in groups) was preferred more by Caucasian students than by Mexican-American children (Dunn & Dunn, 1992, 1993) and more by Mexican-Americans students than by African-American children (Sims, 1988). Mexican-American students required significantly more sociological variety than either African-Americans or Caucasians (Dunn, Griggs, & Price, 1993; Jalali, 1989). Mexican-American males were authority-oriented and Mexican-American females were strongly peer-oriented (Dunn, Griggs, & Price, 1993).

4. Physiological learning style elements relate to time of day, food and drink intake, perception, and mobility. Puerto-Rican college students exhibit a strong preference for learning in the late morning, afternoon, and evening. The time-of-day preferences of Mexican-Americans are less clear. Sims (1988) found that Caucasians preferred drinking or eating snacks while learning significantly more than did Mexican-Americans. Yong and Ewing (1992) reported that Latinos' strongest perceptual strength was kinesthetic. Both Caucasians and African-American were significantly more auditory and visual than Mexican-Americans (Dunn, Griggs, & Price, 1993; Sims, 1988). The study by Sims (1988) indicated that Caucasian students exhibited a higher need for mobility than did Mexican-American students. Contrary to

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findings for the U.S. general population, Mexican-American females had a significantly higher need for mobility than their male counterparts (Dunn, Griggs, & Price, 1993).

5. *Psychological learning style* elements relate to global versus analytical processing. The construct of field dependence/independence is a component of this learning style. Field dependent individuals are more group-oriented and cooperative and less competitive than field independent individuals. Research generally has indicated that Mexican-American and other minority students are more field dependent than nonminority students. Hudgens (1993) found that Hispanic middle and secondary school students were more field dependent than Anglo students; Hispanic female (and African-American male) students had a greater internal locus of control than other groups; and Hispanic male (and African-American female) students had a greater external locus of control than other groups.

Implications for Counseling and Teaching

Counselors and teachers can be aware that, although there are common characteristics in this population, Hispanic-Americans are a very diverse group and include distinct subcultures that differ significantly as to custom, values, and educational orientation. It is also important to recognize the limitations of research. Demographic variables other than gender and ethnicity that impact on learning style may not be isolated in studies. These variables include socioeconomic class, geographical region, primary language, religion, family structure, and number of generations in the U.S.

Schools can provide Spanish-speaking teachers, counselors, and educational assistants. This is especially true in areas where there are many first-generation Hispanic families.

For immigrant Latino adolescents, identity formation and individuation can be especially challenging and problematic. This is because their cultural values include strong family loyalty and allegiance, values that are in conflict with the behavioral styles of mainstream U.S. adolescents who strive for self-expression and individuality. For Hispanic adolescents with identity-related problems, group counseling with peers who are experiencing similar conflicts can be helpful. Referral for pastoral counseling may be indicated for Roman Catholic youths, because there is usually trust and respect for priests.

Educators need to be aware of self-image problems of Hispanic-American students that may result from a rejection of their ethnicity and from attempts to conform to the larger Anglo culture. To address these problems, educators can plan interventions that acknowledge and celebrate cultural diversity when teaching and counseling Hispanic youth.

Based on the research examined above, teachers and counselors should expect larger numbers of Hispanic students to prefer: (1) a cool environment; (2) conformity; (3) peer-oriented learning; (4) kinesthetic instructional resources; (5) a high degree of structure; (6) late morning and afternoon peak energy levels; (7) variety as opposed to routines; and (8) a field-dependent cognitive style. Teachers and counselors should be aware of cultural group characteristics, for the most responsive teaching and counseling strategies, however, they should emphasize the learning style strengths of each individual and try to match instructional resources and methods to individual environmental, emotional, physiological, and psychological preferences.

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For More Information

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